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MEMPHIS GRAND JURY DECLINES TO HEAR KING EVIDENCE

MEMPHIS, Tenn (Reuter) - A grand jury refused to grant a hearing Tuesday to a private attorney who says he has evidence James Earl Ray was not involved in the 1968 slaying of civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

Ray is serving a 99-year sentence for the assassination.

Lawyer Wayne Chastain, who was acting on the instructions of Ray's attorney, Bill Pepper, had applied for a hearing before a grand jury in Tennessee in which he would name a retired U.S. businessman who claims to have hired the man who killed King.

But Chastain told Reuters Tuesday in a telephone interview that a foreman for the Shelby County grand jury declined his request for a hearing.

King's family have declined to comment on case. But the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was with King at the time of the shooting, said Sunday he has always suspected a conspiracy.

The latest episode came to light over the weekend, when a London newspaper, The Observer, reported that a white Memphis businessman confessed to arranging King's murder in exchange for a $100,000 payment from two other men, including one with alleged links to the Mafia.

Pepper, Ray's attorney since 1988, has been investigating the assassination for years and The Observer said the businessman decided to confess and seek immunity from prosecution because Pepper was closing in on him.

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